

Idaho Department of Fish and Game Southwest Idaho



Habitat News



Features:

- P. 2 Water Flows at Roswell Marsh
- P. 3 Ft. Boise WMA Update
- P. 4 A Busy Spring at Andrus WMA
- P. 5 WMA Pheasant Stocking Program
- P. 6 Providing Homes with Character
- P. 7 High Water at C. J. Strike WMA
- P. 8 HIP Program News
- P. 9 Safe Passage for Humans and Wildlife

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Evin Oneale

Greetings and Welcome... *by Jerry Deal*

Welcome to the first edition of the Southwest Region Habitat Program newsletter. I hope what you find inside will prove helpful in answering some of your questions, inform you about activities in the habitat program, and introduce you to the regional habitat staff.

Habitat management may be among the least glamorous jobs in the fish and wildlife profession, but Idaho Fish and Game's Southwest Region staff is dedicated to doing the best possible job for wildlife and the public with the resources available. Inside you will find a few examples of what people here do to improve and maintain wildlife habitat on over 80,000 acres of managed lands, as well as help private landowners achieve their conservation objectives, and evaluate potential impacts to habitat due to development and public works projects.

With a steadily shrinking base of land on which to preserve, protect, perpetuate and manage the wildlife populations of the state, good habitat management becomes more critical every year. Although great for a healthy economy, more housing, parking, roads and vehicles challenge us to do as much as possible with what's left. Promoting a healthy lifestyle that includes plenty of outdoor recreation is also a good thing but again, presents a challenge to focus management of lands for the benefit of wildlife and wildlife-based activities. We have our best chance of serving the public by keeping you informed and involved, so please contact us with any feedback or questions you may have. Thanks for your interest.

A Dry Marsh Re-watered *by Clair Kofoed*

It goes without saying that in order to have waterfowl, you need water, especially in wetlands. In dry southwestern Idaho, marsh-type wetland habitat is scarce, so when a 150-acre wetland parcel known as Roswell Marsh came up for sale in 1986, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game jumped at the chance to partner with *Ducks Unlimited* and make the purchase. The area, located about three miles west of the town of Roswell on the South side of Hwy 18, was well-known as a natural wetland dating back to the time the lower Boise Valley was settled in the late 1800s.

In 1909, a 30-inch diameter concrete irrigation siphon was constructed by a local canal company to cross the wetland and bring irrigation water to farmland on the other side. Photographs of the pipeline construction clearly show horse-drawn fresnos digging a muddy trench amid stands of hardstem-bullrush, a permanent wetland plant.

In the late 1980s, a 35-acre piece of land adjoining the marsh property also became available. When this parcel was purchased, the acreage came with irrigation rights for canal water that had never been delivered. A plan was devised to obtain a pipeline easement across a neighboring property so canal irrigation water could augment and expand the native wetland.

Construction of water structures and dikes took place in 1987 and the 180-acre wetland was up and running in a short time. Ducks and water birds responded almost immediately and

See Roswell Marsh, page 3



Water is flowing once again at Roswell Marsh, thanks to the installation of a new well. Photo by Clair Kofoed.

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Roswell Marsh (from page 2)

the area became a haven for hunters and wildlife watchers.

Several years later - in 2003 - the Idaho Department of Water Resources determined that the canal company supplying Roswell water could only use their water right for agricultural irrigation. Although wildlife storage is an allowable use of water under Idaho law, it was not included in the existing water right that Fish and Game had been using. The water stopped flowing and the "wetland" was no longer wet.

During the time the water was off, habitat managers worked hard trying to find alternative water sources. Pumping waste water, and using canal-spill water were explored, as was drilling a well, the manager's preferred alternative. In early 2007, with \$5,000 dollars in seed money obtained from the State Habitat section, a domestic/stockwater test well was drilled at Roswell. The result of the test well could hardly have been better; abundant, clean water was found only 120 feet below the surface.

Now the real challenge began. Department staff needed to secure a well permit during a time when a moratorium had been placed on all new lower Boise River water permits. A private consultant was hired to look at the Roswell site, and he determined the aquifer supplying the well was recharged from Snake River water, not the lower Boise. After the "home run" result from the well and aquifer testing, application was made for a large ground water permit. Finally, after over seven years without water a well permit was obtained for Roswell. Plans to install a 10-inch well were made and funding was sought to get the job done. Ducks Unlimited again came forward and raised a large sum of money at a special event to honor long-time supporter Paul Ralston, with Fish and Game matching those funds. The well was drilled, and by late spring of 2009, water and wildlife were again flowing to Roswell Marsh. FBWMA



*A 10-inch pipe now feeds water to Roswell Marsh.
Photo by Clair Kofoed.*

News From Ft. Boise WMA by Clair Kofoed

This year's long, wet spring delayed - by about a month - staff efforts to get spring food plots planted. When things finally dried out, and to cut food plot costs, grain sorghum (milo) was planted instead of corn. Additional food plots will be planted in winter wheat this fall. This crop seems to work very well, saves money and gives staff additional available field time during the spring "bottleneck" season.

Noxious weed control is a problem all landowners have to face. Fish and Game is no different, and on Fort Boise WMA, it was especially challenging this spring to find a day without wind, rain or rain forecast the next day. The timing of the spring storms - every three or four days over a two month period - was such that weeds and grasses are perhaps as tall as they have ever been. Plans call for the mowing of hunting lanes in late summer to try and give folks help with navigating some of the thickest areas. FBWMA



*Last fall's winter wheat plot across Sand Hollow creek, ¼ mile west of Ft. Boise WMA headquarters turned out especially well.
Photo by Clair Kofoed.*



Cover is especially dense on Fort Boise this year due to high spring precipitation. Photo by Clair Kofoed.

A Busy Spring at Andrus WMA *by Anna Owsiak*

The 2010 June high rainfall event left a heavy mark on Andrus WMA. Working in cooperation with the Department's engineering staff and volunteers, repairs were made and new water bars installed on 25 miles of water damaged roads. These repairs were able to channel much of this year's rain safely off roads with few problems. A livestock corral, barn and bridge on the WMA were in danger of being undercut by changes to Brownlee Creek from the June event, and this past April, the Department's engineering staff helped reinforce creek banks with tree revetments, willow plantings and strategic bank armoring to slow water velocities at these critical points.

Volunteer Help

Andrus WMA annually hosts volunteer work weekends each spring, and they are going as strong as ever! This year, three groups signed up to assist with fence maintenance and other projects during April, May and June. To date, a total of 25 volunteers have replaced old or broken corner braces and wire gates, improved over a half mile of deteriorating boundary fence and replaced two access gates and wing fences to manage motor vehicle traffic. The time and efforts given by these volunteers are greatly appreciated, many of whom come from the Mountain Home and Treasure Valley area and return year after year. These volunteers are enthusiastic about making a difference for wildlife, and often recruit their spouses, children, coworkers and friends to help out.

Plant Identification

In May, twenty University of Idaho students studying rangeland plants with their instructor, spent part of a day identifying plants on the WMA for the field work portion of their class. This group had spent 10 days on the road in Oregon, Nevada and Idaho, viewing different plant communities and identifying key plants within each. They spent the night camped at the WMA before heading to Grangeville for their last stop of the trip and the final exam.

This year, an enhanced long-term vegetation monitoring program is being implemented. Two technicians will spend approximately two months on the WMA collecting vegetation data. This data will be used to help answer questions about how different uses and environmental conditions on the WMA are affecting wildlife habitat and plant communities. This year's work is the test run for a monitoring program to be developed and implemented on all WMAs across Idaho. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has also committed to conducting a rangeland ecological inventory on the WMA over the next two years. This inventory identifies plant communities and their current status, and



Staff and volunteers anchor trees along the banks of Brownlee Creek to slow water velocities, deposit sediments and protect a corral.

Photo by Anna Owsiak.

provides information helpful in determining what changes will likely occur to a plant community after fire or other major disturbance.

Two years ago, a patch of yellow star thistle was discovered by a hunter near WMA headquarters. A great deal of time and effort were spent last year to eradicate this highly invasive weed, and those efforts appear to have paid off. Surveys this year have found few yellow star thistle plants. Since yellow star thistle seeds can live for years in the soil before sprouting, eradication efforts will continue for years to come. This is one weed that needs the upmost vigilance to make sure not one plant survives!

Spotted knapweed is another weed found on the WMA that needs vigilant attention, and each year approximately 500 to 1,000 acres are inspected and treated for this weed. Control efforts for the past 15 years have helped to reduce knapweed levels. Several spotted knapweed biological control insects have been released on the WMA over the years,

See Andrus WMA, page 5

Andrus WMA (from page 4)

and both last year and this year, many of these beetles and gall flies could be seen attacking knapweed plants.

Interestingly, bedstraw has become an increasingly invasive plant on the WMA. More often found in damp and shadier areas, this year it seems to be favoring more of the perennial grass stands and sun lit pastures. Herbicides are being used bring these patches under control.

Upcoming activities on Andrus WMA for this summer and fall include a Bioblitz in late June; additional road repairs and water bar construction to address water damage from this year's rain and improve roads prior to fall hunting seasons; and continued noxious weed control efforts on about 2,000 acres for puncturevine, Scotch thistle, yellow star thistle, spotted knapweed and yellow toadflax. **AWMA**



Volunteers from Mountain Home smile after spending two days replacing boundary fence for livestock control at AndrusWMA. Photo by Anna Owskiak.

WMA Pheasant Stocking Program - 2011 by Jerry Deal

Pheasant hunters will have the opportunity to harvest the same number of birds this year as in 2010 on each of four regional WMAs where pen-reared pheasants are released. In response to hunter requests, one change this year will include additional releases during the final week of the season, between the Christmas and New Year holidays. The total number of birds, the cost of a permit, and the harvest rules remain unchanged from last year.

Fort Boise and CJ Strike WMAs will each distribute 3,616 pheasants throughout the season, including 100 birds for the youth hunt that begins October 1st. A total of 1,041 pheasants will be released on the Payette River WMA and 1,400 birds will go to Montour WMA for the season, including 50 each for the youth hunt. When finalized, this year's delivery schedule will be posted on the Fish and Game website. Hunters should be aware that even with a final schedule of planned releases, weather conditions, transportation issues and other unforeseen events may require some local adjustments.



The author releases a pheasant on MontourWMA last fall. More than 8,700 pheasants will be released on wildlife management areas across the region in 2011. Photo by Evin Oneale.

Providing Homes With Character *by Tim Shelton*

Outdoor enthusiasts who have spent any time on the Snake and Payette Rivers have probably spotted a number of wood duck boxes and goose nesting platforms. These manufactured homes for our local waterfowl seem to be everywhere. Actually, about 1,000 nesting structures are located along the rivers, reservoirs and islands in Southwestern Idaho. These structures, filled with shredded and chipped bark, provide safe and comfortable nest locations for waterfowl and their offspring.

To some people it may seem that these nesting structures are installed and then forgotten. The reason for this may be their weathered appearance. However, older structures that have that “lived-in look” are very attractive to waterfowl; these birds apparently like older homes with some character. Still, most are serviced annually.

Fish and Game’s annual cleaning and maintenance project on these nesting structures has recently been updated thanks to modern technology. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) are being used to map all existing nest boxes and platforms. Not only will the GPS data base help to locate structures in the future, it will also help determine where additional nesting structures are needed.

Because of the limited number of natural nesting cavities along our waterways, wood duck boxes have proven very popular to a wide variety of wildlife. Wood ducks use about 50 percent of the structures, which help to maintain and bolster a healthy population of wood ducks in Southwestern Idaho. Other wildlife use the boxes also, including screech owls, American kestrels, eastern fox squirrels and mink. In total, more than 90 percent of the boxes are used by some type of wildlife.

Goose nesting platforms have better than an 80 percent utilization rate by geese. The true value of these platforms comes when rivers flood during spring runoff. Most geese have established a nest by April 10, and a typical nest will have five to six eggs, with 100 nests yielding about 550 eggs. Geese nesting on the ground are often flooded out by spring flows (a serious problem this year) with platform nesting geese often being the only flood survivors.



The author (second from right) and some young volunteers during a recent nestbox cleaning and maintenance effort along the Payette River.

While these man-made nesting structures have proven beneficial to some wildlife species, other human-caused problems have also cropped up. River use is a reflection of the growth in the valley’s human population. As more people use the river, it’s becoming apparent that nesting birds are being disturbed, causing them to abandon their nests. During spring, when cabin fever rages, huge numbers of people are engaging in outdoor activities such as fishing, dog training and boating. Done improperly, these activities can disturb nesting birds, resulting in lower production rates.

Most Canada geese hatch their young by May 10, while wood ducks will nest until July 31. River users should avoid walking near a nesting structure during the critical period from March 1 to July 31. If all of us using the great outdoors would be a bit more aware that this time of year is critical for many wildlife species, we would have more birds to enjoy later.

Waterfowl are a wonderful natural resource, and thanks in part to the installation of nest boxes and platforms, wood ducks and Canada geese will continue to flourish along the Payette and Snake Rivers, providing viewing and hunting enjoyment for future generations. **PRWMA**

Water, Water Everywhere *by Robin Holmquist*

Well, at least this year it seemed that way on CJ Strike WMA and across most of the state. For over a month there was a lake above State Highway 78 from the Bruneau River flooding; below the highway it was a swamp with ducks paddling through the parking lots. The high water made some changes to the land, damaged some fences and cutting holes in meadows and parking areas. Most of the damage has been repaired, but greater care may be in order when travelling familiar routes. The extra water also allowed for less irrigation from the ditches, providing an opportunity to do some more work on ditch crossings and other irrigation system improvements.

Fortunately the uplands have been dry enough to establish food plots at Trueblood Habitat Area and allow the sharecropper to plant wheat at the Duck Ponds. Normally, plans call for returning waterfowl to use up most of the food plots during the late winter. In early spring, the plots are burned, plowed and reseeded, as was done at Trueblood WHA and the Duck Ponds. This spring there appeared to be a lot of corn left in surrounding private fields and the Hot Springs food plots were not used as heavily, leaving more standing crop. The abundant wheat and corn food plots from last year were left standing to allow wildlife to use them. Even with all



Hot Springs segment visitors should notice some changes this fall. Photo by Robin Holmquist.

the wildlife use in late spring there was enough wheat that fell to the ground to make a good crop of wheat for this year and the corn field is standing well, with alfalfa

growing as an understory. Even through June, there were hundreds of mourning doves and pheasants using the fields for food, cover and nesting.

Visitors to the Hot Springs Segment will notice that the old house is gone and the site is being rehabilitated for wild-



"Lake Bruneau" remained adjacent to State Highway 78 for more than a month this spring. Photo by Robin Holmquist.

life habitat and a more defined parking area. After nesting season, some thick Kochia patches on the North end of the fields were treated with 12-inch mowing to encourage grass to grow and still leave hiding cover. This will be started at the same time hunting lanes are cut for the first time in the season.



Mourning doves made good use of food plots this past spring. Photo by Robin Holmquist.

The high water may also limit grazing to a very short period on the Bruneau Segment. The original intent of the grazing was to limit weed growth and allow later weed treatment along with developing access paths through the willow and Russian olive. Grazing appeared to be very effective last year, and we had already planned to change some use areas this year to leave more standing cover; spring flooding actually helped with that plan.

After all the water, it was nice to see a good number of duck and pheasant broods around the WMA. Hopefully, you won't need to consider throwing in a set of hip waders for pheasant hunting at CJ Strike this fall. **CJSWMA**

Interseeding on Private and Public Lands *by Andy Ogden*

One of the projects that Habitat Biologists perform under the Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) involves using a small tractor and inter-seeder to plant desirable shrub, grass and forb seed to improve habitat for upland birds and big game. The process attempts to replicate seedling establishment conditions that existed before exotic annual grasses and weeds invaded Southwest Idaho. Back then, native sage brush, bitterbrush and bunch grasses reseeded themselves naturally.

Equipment developed by the Department, in conjunction with *Pheasants Forever*, is used to inexpensively improve dryland areas to outcompete invasive grass and weeds because chemical and extensive mechanical treatments are too expensive for most private landowners, even with cost sharing from HIP.

Any dryland planting must be done during the winter to allow the planted seed enough time to absorb water and be



The Pheasants Forever tractor and interseeder working on a wildfire rehabilitation project at Crane Falls Lake. Photo by Andy Ogden.

ready to germinate as soon as soil temperatures warm in the spring. Most years, our spring growing season doesn't stay wet enough for spring planting to work. Even winter plantings will fail if the weather the next spring isn't conducive for the seedlings, and some of the land we've worked on has had to be planted three times before the right spring and summer weather occurred to allow the seedlings to survive. We've found it best to wait until after cheat grass and other competitive seed have germinated in the fall since the interseeder creates a scrape about a foot wide and uproots competitive plants as the desirable seed is being planted in the scrape.

The seeder can plant a variety of different types of seed, but we encourage landowners to use plants that will eventually replace or significantly reduce the amount and vigor of competitive dryland grasses that are the main reason we have larger and more frequent wildfires. We've found the seed mixture of silver sagebrush, forage kochia and dryland grasses like Snake River or Siberian wheatgrass to be dependable and effective for our needs. HIP

Left, above: Silver sagebrush and forage kochia seedlings three months after planting.

Left: A BLM Wildlife Tract five years after being seeded with basin big sagebrush and forage kochia. Both photos by Andy Ogden.



Safe Passage for Humans and Wildlife *by Ed Bottum*

Almost 70 years ago, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game established the Boise River Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to provide a winter home for migrating mule deer. Since then, the WMA has grown to encompass 36,000 acres managed primarily for wildlife.

Through the heart of the WMA runs State Highway 21. Wildlife-vehicle accidents have always occurred along this route, but the number of deer and elk struck and killed by motorists has steadily increased each year as more commuters travel to and from Boise. Last fall, the Idaho Transportation Department constructed a new highway bridge expressly designed as an underpass for wildlife. Motion sensing cameras documented mule deer and other wildlife using the underpass within days of project completion. Since then, deer, elk, fox, coyotes and mountain lions have all been caught on camera, using the underpass.

The underpass location itself is no accident. In advance of the project, careful study was conducted to determine where best to build the structure. Thirty years of records indicated that within one-quarter mile of the final



Motion-sensing cameras regularly capture images of mule deer and other wildlife using the underpass. Animals began using the structure within days after completion.

from a nearby cliff. Either way, it is obvious that the new passageway is having the desired effect; providing safe travel for wildlife and motorists along this stretch of State Highway 21.

In addition to the location, the structure's design seems to be working. Animals have shown no aversion to it, except when vehicles are passing over. It is anticipated that animals

construction site, more than 100 mule deer attempting to cross the highway were struck and killed by vehicles. This past winter, a single mule deer was found dead just off the road and near the underpass but actual cause of death remains questionable; it may have fallen



The wildlife underpass spanning State Highway 21 is being used by a number of wildlife species and will only become more effective at zoning wildlife from motorists. Photo by Scott Rudel.

will become accustomed to this sound after using the underpass for a time. Mule deer were expected to use the crossing during fall and spring migration, and motion cameras confirmed this. However, mule deer were documented using the underpass from both directions throughout the winter months to access different parts of their winter range. No one predicted this much wintertime use, but all involved were pleased to see the underpass serve this purpose.

The Highway 21 wildlife underpass is just one project conducted by the Boise River Wildlife Linkage Partnership, a cooperative group of state, county, city and federal agencies, sportsman groups, insurance companies and private individuals. Constructing the bridge/underpass was made possible through the use of one-time federal "stimulus" money but much work remains to be done. This fall, fencing will be installed by a contractor and volunteers from several local sportsmen's groups. But for wildlife (and people) to get the full benefit of the crossing, additional fencing – designed to guide animals to the underpass – must be purchased and installed. Fund raising efforts continue to complete this phase of the project. Anyone wishing to donate to the project – manpower, funding or both – is invited to visit the project website at <http://idahowildlifecrossings.com> for more information. **BRWMA**